

Nesbit Edith

Pussy and Doggy Tales



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Too Clever by Half

"TELL us a story, mother," said the youngest kitten but three.

"You've heard all my stories," said the mother cat, sleepily turning over in the hay.

"Then make a new one," said the youngest kitten, so pertly that Mrs. Buff boxed her ears at once – but she laughed too. Did you ever hear a cat laugh? People say that cats often have occasion to do it.

"I do know one story," she said; "but I'm not sure that it's true, though it was told me by a most respectable brindled gentleman, a great friend of my dear mother's. He said he was a second cousin twenty-nine times removed of Mrs. Tabby White, the lady the story is about."

"Oh, do tell it," said all the kittens, sitting up very straight and looking at their mother with green anxious eyes.

"Very well," she said kindly; "only if you interrupt I shall leave off."

So there was silence in the barn, except for Mrs. Buff's voice and the soft sound of pleased purring which the kittens made as they listened to the enchanting tale.

"Mrs. Tabby White seems to have been as clever a cat as ever went rat-catching in a pair of soft-soled shoes. She always knew just where a mouse would peep out of the wainscot, and she had her soft-sharp paw on him before he had time to know that he was not alone in the room. She knew how to catch nice breakfasts for herself and her children, a trick I will teach you, my dears, when the spring comes; she used to lie quite quietly among the ivy on the wall, and then take the baby birds out of the nest when the grown-up birds had gone to the grub-shop. Mrs. Tabby White was very clever, as I said – so clever that presently she was not satisfied with being at the very top of the cat profession.

"Cat-people have more sense than human people, of course," she said to herself; "but still there are some things one might learn from them. I must watch and see how they do things."

"So next morning when the cook gave Mrs. Tabby White her breakfast, she noticed that cook poured the milk out of a jug into a saucer. That afternoon Tabby felt thirsty, but instead of putting her head into the jug and drinking in the usual way, – you know – she tilted up the jug to pour the milk out as she had seen the cook do. But cats' paws, though they are so strong to catch rats and mice and birds, are too weak to hold big brown jugs. The nasty deceitful jug fell off the dresser and broke itself. 'Just to spite me, I do believe,' said Mrs. Tabby. And the milk was all spilled.

"Now how on earth could that jug have been broken?" said cook, when she came in.

"It must have been the cat," said the kitchenmaid; and she was quite right, but nobody believed her.

"Then Mrs. Tabby White noticed that human people slept in big soft-cushioned white beds, instead of sleeping on the kitchen hearth-rug, or in the barn, like cat people. So she said to her children one evening —

"My dears, we are going to move into a new house."

"And the kittens were delighted, and they all went upstairs very quietly, and crept into the very best human bed. But unfortunately that bed had been got ready for a human uncle to sleep in; and when he found the cats there he turned them out, not gently, and threw boots at them till they fled, pale with fright to the ends of their pretty tails. And next morning he told the Mistress of the house that horrid CATS had been in his bed, and he vowed that he would never pass another night under a roof where such things were possible. Mrs. Tabby White was very glad – because no

lady can wish for the visits of a person who throws boots at her. But the Mistress of the house said sadly, 'Oh, Tabby! – you have lost us a fortune!' And Tabby for all her cleverness didn't understand what the Mistress meant, but went on purring proudly, and wondering what clever thing she could do next. And *I* don't know what it meant either, so don't you interrupt with silly questions.

"I think we ought to wear shoes,' was the next thing Mrs. Tabby White said; but all the human shoes were too big for her. However, there was a nice pair of salmon-coloured kid shoes, quite new, belonging to the human child's big doll – and Mrs. Tabby White put them on her eldest kitten's little brown feet.

"Now, Brindle,' she said (he was named after the gentleman who told me the story), 'you are grander than any kitten ever was before.' And at first Brindle felt pleased – then he tried to feel pleased – then he knew he wasn't pleased at all. Then the shoes began to hurt him horribly, so he mewed sadly; and Mrs. Tabby White boxed his ears softly – as mother cats do; *you* know how I mean! But when she was asleep he took off the pink shoes and bit them to pieces. And Nurse slapped him for it. Poor Mrs. Tabby White was very miserable when she saw her son being slapped: for it is one thing to box your son's ears (softly, as mother cats do; *you* know how I mean), and quite another to see another person do it – heavily, as is the way with nursemaids.

"But the last and greatest effort Mrs. Tabby White made to imitate human manners was one Saturday night.

"She saw the human child have its bath before the nursery fire, with hot water, pink soap, dry towels, and much fussing, and she said to herself, 'Why should I waste hours every day in washing my children with my little white paws and my little pink tongue, when this human child can be made clean in ten minutes with this big bath. If I had more time I could learn to be cleverer, and I should end by being the most wonderful Cat in all the world.' So she sat, and watched, and waited.

"When the human child was in bed and asleep, Nurse went down to her supper, leaving the bath to be cleared away later, for it was a hot supper of baked onions and toasted cheese, and if you don't go to that supper directly it is ready, you may as well not go at all, for it won't be worth eating – at least so I have heard the kitchenmaid say.

"Mrs. Tabby White waited till she heard the last of Nurse's steps on the stairs below, and then she put both her cat-children into the tub, and washed them with rose-scented soap and a Turkey sponge. At first they thought it very good fun, but presently the soap got in their eyes and they were frightened of the sponge, and they cried, mewling piteously, to be taken out. I don't know how she could have done it, I couldn't have treated a kitten of *mine* like that.

"When she took them out, Mrs. Tabby tried to dry them with the soft towel, but somehow catskin is not so easy to dry as child-skin, and the little cats began to shiver, and moan: 'Oh, mother, we were so nice and warm, and now we are so cold! Why is it? What have we done? Were we naughty?'

"'Drat the cats!' said Nurse, when she came up from supper, and found Mrs. Tabby White trying to warm her kittens against her own comfortable fur; 'if they haven't tumbled in the bath!'

"Nurse dried the poor, dear, cruelly-used kittens a little (her hands were bigger than Mrs. Tabby's, so she could do it better), and put them in a basket with flannel, and next day Tabby-Kit was quite well, though rather ragged looking; but Brindle had taken a chill, and for days he hung between life and death. Poor Mrs. Tabby was like a wild cat with anxiety, and when at last Brindle was well again (or nearly, for he always had a slight cough after that), Mrs. Tabby White said to her children, 'My darlings, I was wrong, I was a silly old cat.'

"'No,' purred the cat-children, 'darling mother, you were always the best of cats.'

"Mrs. Tabby kissed them both, for of course any one would be pleased that her children should think her the best of cats, but in her heart she knew well enough how silly she had been.

"Then she set about washing the kittens, not with pink soap and white towel this time, but with white paws and pink tongue in the good old-fashioned way."

"Thank you, mother," said all the kittens; "what a nice horrible story."

"What is the moral?" asked the youngest kitten but three.

"The moral," said Mrs. Buffy, "is, 'There is such a thing as being too clever by half.' I'm not sure about the story being true, but I know the moral is. Why, it's nearly tea-time. Come along, children, and get your tea."

So they all crept quietly away to catch the necessary mice, and the youngest was so afraid of being too clever by half, that she would never have caught a mouse at all, if her mother had not boxed her ears – softly, as mother cats do; you know how I mean!

The White Persian

I WAS a handsome, discreet, middle-aged, respectable, responsible, domesticated tabby cat. I was humble. I knew my place, and kept it. My place was the place nearest the fire in winter, or close to the sunny window in summer. There was nothing to trouble me – not so much as a fly in the cream, or an error in the leaving of the cat's meat, until some thoughtless person gave my master the white Persian cat.

She was very beautiful in her soft, foolish, namby-pamby, blue-eyed way. Of course, she did not understand English, and when they called "Puss, puss," she only ran under the sofa, for she thought they were teasing her. She was mistress only of two languages – Persian and cat-talk.

My master did not think of this. He called her "Puss"; he called her "Pussy"; he called her "Tittums" and "Pussy then"; and a thousand endearments that had formerly been lavished on me were vainly showered on this unresponsive stranger. But when he found she was cold to all of them, my master sighed.

"Poor thing!" he said; "she is deaf."

I sat by the bright fender, and washed my face, and sleeked my pretty paws, and looked on. My master gave up taking very much notice of the new cat. But I had a fear that he might learn Persian or cat-talk, and make friends with her; so I resolved that the best thing for me would be a complete change in the Persian's behaviour – such a change as should make it impossible for her ever to be friends with him again; so I said to her:

"You wonder that our master looks coldly at you. Perhaps you don't know that in England a white cat is supposed to mew twenty times longer and to purr twenty times louder than a cat of any other colour?"

"Oh, thank you so much for telling me," she said gratefully. "I didn't know. As it happens, I have a very good voice."

And the next time she wanted her milk, she mewed in a voice you could have heard twenty miles away. Poor master was so astonished that he nearly dropped the saucer. When she had finished the milk, she jumped upon his knee, and he began to stroke her. She nearly gave herself a fit in her efforts to purr loud enough to please him. At first he was pleased, but when the purring got louder and louder, the poor man put his hands to his ears and said, "Oh dear! oh dear! this is worse than a whole hive of bees."

Still he put her down gently, and I congratulated her on having done so well. She did better. She was an affectionate person, though foolish, and in her anxiety to do what was expected of a cat of her colour in England, she practised day and night.

Her purr was already the loudest I have heard from any cat, but she fancied she could improve her mewing; and she mewed in the garden, she mewed in the house, she mewed at meals, she mewed at prayers, she mewed when she was hungry to show that she wanted food, and she mewed when she had had it to show her gratitude.

"Poor thing," said the master to a friend who had come to see him, "she is so deaf she can't hear the noise she makes."

Of course, I understood what he said, but she hadn't yet picked up a word of English; and if the master *had* begun to learn Persian, I don't suppose he had got much beyond the alphabet.

The Persian's mew was rather feebler that day, because she had a cold.

"I don't think it's so bad," said his friend. "If you really wanted to get rid of her, she is very handsome; she would take a prize anywhere."

"She is yours," said the master instantly; and the strange gentleman took her away in a basket.

That evening it was I who sat on my master's knee – I who superintended the writing of his letters on the green-covered writing table – I who had all the milk that was left over from his tea.

In a few days he had a letter. I read it when he laid it down; and if you don't believe cats can read, I can only say that it is just as easy to read a letter like the master's as it is to write a story like this. The letter begged my master to take back the fair Persian.

"Her howls," the letter went on, "become worse and worse. The poor creature is, as you say, too deaf to be tolerated."

My master wrote back instantly to say that he would rather be condemned to keep a dog than have the fair Persian within his doors again.

Then by return of post came a pitiful letter, begging for help and mercy, and the friend came again to tea. I trembled lest my foreign rival should come back to live with me. But she didn't. The next morning my master took me on his knee, and, stroking me gently, said —

"Ah, Tabbykins! no more Persians for us. I have sent her to my deaf aunt. She will be delighted with her — a most handsome present — and as they are both deaf, the fair Persian's shrieks will hurt nobody.

"But I will have no more prize cats," he said, pouring out some cream for me in his own saucer. "You know how to behave; I will never have any cat but you."

I do, and he never has.

A Powerful Friend

MY mother was the best of cats. She washed us kittens all over every morning, and at odd times during the day she would wash little bits of us, say an ear, or a paw, or a tail-tip, and she was very anxious about our education. I am afraid I gave her a great deal of trouble, for I was rather stout and heavy, and did not take a very active or graceful part in the exercises which she thought good for us.

Our gymnasium was the kitchen hearth-rug. There was always a good fire in the grate, and it seemed to me so much better to go to sleep in front of it than to run round after my own tail, or even my mother's, though, of course, that was a great honour.

As for running after the reel of cotton when the cook dropped it, or playing with the tassel of the blind-cord, or pretending that there were mice inside the paper bag which I knew to be empty, I confess that I had no heart or imagination for these diversions.

"Of course, you know best, mother," I used to say; "but it does seem to me a dreadful waste of time. We might be much better employed."

"How better employed?" asked my mother severely.

"Why," I answered, "in eating or sleeping."

At first my mother used to box my ears, and insist on my learning such little accomplishments as she thought necessary for my station in life.

"You see," she would say, "all this playing with tails and reels and balls of worsted is a preparation for the real business of life."

"What is that?" asked my sister.

"Mouse-catching," said my mother very earnestly.

"There are no mice here," I said, stretching myself.

"No, but you will not always be here; and if you practise the little tricks I show you now with the ball of worsted and the tips of our tails, then, when the great hour comes, and a career is open to you, and you see before you the glorious prize – the MOUSE – you will be quick enough and clever enough to satisfy the highest needs of your nature."

"And supposing we don't play with our tails and the balls of worsted?" I said.

"Then," said my mother bitterly, "you may as well lie down for the mice to run over you."

Thus at first she used to try to show me how foolish it was to think of nothing but eating and sleeping; but after a while she turned all her attention to teaching my brother and sister, and they were apt pupils. They despised nothing small enough to be moved by their paws, which could give them an opportunity of practising. They did not mind making themselves ridiculous – a thing which has been always impossible with me. I have seen Tabby, my sister, in the garden, playing with dead leaves, as excited and pleased as though they had been the birds which she foolishly pretended that they were.

I thought her very silly then, but I lived to wish that I had taken half as much trouble with my lessons as she did with hers. My mother was very pleased with her, especially after she caught the starlings. This was a piece of cleverness which my sister invented and carried through entirely out of her own head. She made friends with one of the cows at the farm near us, and used to go into the cowhouse and jump on the cow's back. Then when the cow was sent out into the field to get her grassy breakfast, my sister used to go with her, riding on her back.

Now birds are always very much on the look-out for cats, and, if they can help it, never allow one of us to come within half-a-dozen yards of them without taking to those silly wings of theirs. I never could see why birds should have wings – so unnecessary.

But birds are not afraid of cows, for cows are very poor sportsmen, and never care to kill and eat anything.

Now the back of a cow is the last place where you would think of looking for a cat; so when the starlings saw the cow coming, they didn't think it worth while to use their wings, and when the cow was quite close to the birds – beautiful, fat, delightful birds – my sister used to pick out with her eye the fattest starling, and then leap suddenly from the cow's back on to her prey. She never missed.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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